THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS MOUNT HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2008

The Ninth Mount Haemus Lecture

How Beautiful Are They - Some thoughts on Ethics in Celtic and European Mythology

by Dr. Brendan Myers

Acknowledgement & Introduction

Good afternoon everyone,

Thank you, very sincerely, for inviting me to come and speak to you today. I think the Mount Haemus Prize is very prestigious, and I feel deeply honoured to have been chosen for it. When Philip Carr-Gomm first offered me this opportunity, I was delighted, and I began researching and writing on the topic of ancient Celtic and European virtue immediately. That was three years ago. A short essay became a long one; a long essay became a book; and that book was published. Therefore, six months before this paper was due, I suddenly realised I had written an entire book full of stuff that I could not use for today's presentation! This paper, therefore, may be seen as a continuation of the research I began three years ago, although it will not be necessary to have read that book in order to follow the argument I shall present to you today. My title comes from an old Scottish folk song in praise of the faeries. Its relevance to my talk may not seem obvious until I'm nearly done, but don't worry. It all fits together, at least in my own mind. I hope that you find my presentation worthy of the honour of the Mount Haemus prize.

Since I am the first professional philosopher invited to deliver the Mount Haemus lecture (that is, professional in the sense that I am paid by a university to teach philosophy), I think it well to start by saying a little bit about the nature of my discipline. Philosophy may be defined as the sustained investigation of our first principles by means of reason. It is the enterprise of asking difficult yet intrinsically interesting questions concerning goodness, reality, truth, beauty, and similar concepts—and, of course, the careful examination of various answers to such questions. Philosophers pay particular attention to the concepts and values and beliefs which people hold and yet which are often assumed, presupposed, and unexamined. As my doctoral supervisor used to say, "Philosophy is all about the taking and the granting of that which is taken for granted."

Philosophy can be distinguished from other intellectual disciplines by the way it examines these questions on a logical and conceptual dimension. Thus, as a philosopher, when I look at the nature of the literary sources by which we may understand ancient Druidry, I am primarily concerned with the coherence and the meaning of the concepts that I find in those sources. To illustrate with an example: as a philosopher I am not interested in whether the Three-Fold Law really is an artifact of ancient Celtic wisdom, or whether it was invented off the cuff by Cecil Williamson in order to prevent Gerald Gardner from cursing someone. That is a problem for a historian, or perhaps a folklorist. What matters to the philosopher is whether the principle is true. Thus, to study Druidry as a philosopher means to study not what ancient Druidry was like. It is to study Druidry with an eye for whether Druidic ideas are

coherent and meaningful. This is my task no matter how old or new those ideas are. And as a philosopher, I have the entire field of human history and literature as my territory, not just the history and literature of the Druids, or of the Irish, or the Canadians, or any of the tribes I happen to belong to. Philosophy is a universal discipline.
Philosophy has several sub-disciplines within it, and in this presentation I focus on two of them: ethics, which is the study of what is right and good; and aesthetics, the study of what is beautiful. My philosophical purpose here today is to explore how ethics and aesthetics sometimes overlap each other, and indeed mutually imply one another. In a school of ethical thought called Virtue theory, this overlap is particularly apparent, as I shall explain. And I shall show what relevance this has to contemporary Druidry: I think some of you may find the connexions surprising.

1: The Character Orientation of Virtue

Let me start by sketching a very brief history of contemporary pagan ethical writings. For in the last few years, it seems that there has been a lot of people in the contemporary pagan movement suddenly interested in ethics. "When Why If" by Canadian author and Tarot-deck designer Robin Wood, was probably the first book on the matter published in the trade-paperback market (Llewellyn, 1991). Its argument consisted mainly in enthusiastic praise for the Wiccan Rede and for a Utilitarian standard of moral reasoning. While it probably met the needs of the average reader of a Llewellyn book, its thesis bore no resemblance whatever to how ancient pagans thought about ethics. The next major book on contemporary pagan ethics worthy of mention is Rabinovich and MacDonald's "An Ye Harm None" (Citadel, 2004). Both of these authors are professional academics: Rabinovich teaches anthropology at the University of Ottawa, and MacDonald (the pen-name of Sîan Reid) is a professor of sociology at Carleton University, also in Ottawa. While this title did fill a need for a much more serious and comprehensive treatment of Pagan ethics, it also focused on practical affairs, and on the Utilitarian principle of the Wiccan Rede. It had little to say about historical models of ethics. From the late 90's onward, many books in the Pagan market included single-chapters on ethics. Philip Carr-Gomm's handbook "What do Druids Believe?" was one of these. I mention it here not just because Mr. Carr-Gomm is in the audience. I mention it because his chapter was one of the first published discussions of pagan ethics in the trade-paperback market to approach the subject through a standard of reasoning other than Wiccan Rede Utilitarianism. Most recently, in April of this year Emma Restall Orr published "Living with Honour" (O Books, 2008), a book-length treatment of Pagan ethics that also hardly mentions Wiccan Rede. Yet her treatment of the subject was still governed by Utilitarianism (I state that as a fact about her book, not as a criticism of it). You can see this in her use of Utilitarian philosophers like Peter Singer. My own book on ethics, "The Other Side of Virtue", followed hers three months later.
A history of pagan thinking on ethics can go back in time a lot further. From the very beginning of Druidry, right back in the Iron age, Druids were responsible for teaching ethics. Many of the primary sources written by Roman eyewitnesses attest to this. For instance, here's Julius Caesar:

They [the druids] act as judges in practically all disputes, whether between tribes or between individuals; when any crime is committed, or a murder takes place, or a dispute arises about an inheritance or a boundary, it is they who adjudicate the matter and appoint the compensation to be paid and received by the parties concerned.

Similarly, here are the words of Strabo:

The bards composed and sung odes; the Uatis attended to the sacrifices and studied nature; while the Druids studied nature and moral philosophy. So confident are the people in the justice of the Druids that they refer all private and public disputes to them; and these men on many occasions have made peace between armies actually drawn up for battle.

An alternative translation of part of that quote from Strabo yields a phrase that seems to appear almost every time someone writes an essay about the ancient Druidic ethical teachings: "Because the Druids are considered the most just of men, they are entrusted with unbiased decisions concerning, not only of the private disputes, but public disputes as well." Quotations concerning the Druidic expertise in moral philosophy are so well known by almost everybody that I need not mention any more of them.

Going by Roman sources alone, we know with great confidence that they were teachers of ethics, but we know almost nothing of what their teachings actually were. For the content of ancient Druidic ethical thought, we could look to Diogenes Laertius' observation that: "Druids make their pronouncements by means of riddles and dark sayings, teaching that the gods must be worshipped, and no evil done, and manly behaviour maintained." Other than that almost accidental remark, we know almost nothing of ancient Druidic ethical teachings from Roman historical accounts.

However, Roman accounts are not the only accounts that we are able to study. We can also look to mythology, and there we suddenly find an enormous wealth of ethical ideas coming straight from the mouths of Druids and other prominent people in ancient Celtic society. Let me start with the well known story of the Championship of Ulster. One evening, a man called Uath the Stranger entered the feasting hall uninvited. When the warriors demand to know what he wants, he says:

"The thing I want is the thing I cannot find, and I after going through the whole of Ireland and the whole world looking for it, and that is a man that will keep his word and will hold to his agreement with me."
"What agreement is that?" said Fergus. "Here is this axe," he said, "and the man into whose hands it is put is to cut off my head to-day, I to cut his head off to-morrow. And as you men of Ulster have a name beyond the men of all other countries for strength and skill, for courage, for greatness, for highmindedness, for behaviour, for truth and generosity, for worthiness, let you find one among you that will hold to his word and keep to his bargain."

One warrior stands up and chops off the stranger's head right away. But the stranger picks the head up, tucks it under his arm, and walks home. He returns the next day, head on his shoulders where it belongs, but the warrior who cut it off was nowhere to be found. A second warrior then takes up the wager, but loses his nerve the next day as well. On the third day, when no one volunteers, Uath declares that the men of Emhain Macha have no honour. This judgment infuriates Cu Chullain, and he angrily leapt up and sliced the man's head off so that it flew up to the rafters and shook the hall's foundations. But the next day, when Uath returns to the hall to do his part, Cu Chullain also returns. "Death is coming to me", Cu Chullain says, "but I would sooner meet with death than break my word." (ibid pg. 424). Uath the Stranger raises his axe and swings, but strikes the floor instead, and says: "Rise up, Cu Chullain… of all the heroes of Ulster, whatever may be their daring, there is not one to compare with you in courage and in bravery and in truth." (ibid pg. 425)

Contemporary Druidic writers sometimes make a certain fuss about the implicit mysticism in this story. Actually I think there is more Monty Python in it than mysticism. But let me draw attention to the use of moral language here. Uath the Stranger says he is looking for a man who will keep his word, and he has come to Emhain Macha since the warriors there have a

reputation for outstanding qualities of moral character: courage, generosity, and so on. Cu Chullain is the man who embodies these qualities best, as he is prepared to uphold them even at the cost of his own life. This is a clue to the nature of the ethical ideas which held in ancient Celtic society. For Cu Chullain's reasoning owes nothing to the rule-following vocabulary of Deontology or Divine Command, nor to the Utilitarian logic of aiming for desirable consequences. Rather, his reasoning is framed in the vocabulary of identity and character. On this model of ethics, the right thing to do is that which embodies excellent character. Only in such terms is the story of Uath the Stranger intelligible. Indeed, the actions and choices of most Celtic heroes are intelligible only by reference to the character traits expected of warriors in Celtic society.

This vocabulary of ethics is known to contemporary philosophers as Virtue theory. Virtue is the school of thought in which what matters in ethics is not the consequences of an action, as in the case of Utilitarianism. With Virtue, what matters is the kind of person that you are, and the qualities of character which you have installed within yourself by means of habit. In European mythology, including Celtic mythology, when the characters make decisions and choices, and when they describe the concepts and principles by which they understand their lives, they generally do so primarily in terms of Virtue. Nor is it only in mythological story-telling that one finds this vocabulary. There is a genre of Irish heroic literature, dating from the 7th to the 10th centuries, called the Audacht or the Auricept, meaning 'a testament' or 'a teaching'. They consist in ethical teachings given by chiefs to their heirs, by poets or druids or other teachers to their students, and by elders to their foster-sons. Most of these texts offer lists of virtues, sometimes specified for the social position or the stage of life of the listener. For instance, this is what the Testament of Morann says is expected of a newly installed chieftain.

Tell him, let him be merciful, just, impartial, conscientious, firm, generous, hospitable, honourable, stable, beneficent, capable, honest, well-spoken, steady, [and] true judging. For there are ten things which extinguish the injustice of every ruler… rule and worth, fame and victory, progeny and kindred, peace and long life, good fortune and tribes.

Another Irish wisdom-text, the Instructions of Cormac, describes a conversation between King Cormac Mac Airt and his grandson Carbre. Part of their conversation goes as follows:

'Question, what are the proper qualities of a chief?' said Carbre.
'Not hard to tell', said Cormac.
'Let him have good gessa,
let him be sober,
let him be an invader,
let him have good desires,
let him be affable,
let him be humble,
let him be proud
let him be quick,
let him be steadfast,
let him be a poet,
let him be versed in legal lore,
let him be wise,
let him be generous,
let him be decorous,
let him be sociable,
let him be gentle,

let him be hard,
let him be loving,
let him be merciful…"

This particular list from the Instructions of Cormac names 47 virtues in total. And the text as a whole has more lists like this, some of which are much longer. Cormac describes the qualities called upon for various times and places, such as when feasting in the hall. Some of it offers advice for people in certain stages of their lives. For instance Cormac describes what virtues he had when he was a child, and how he grew to be the man and king he became. The character-orientation of Pagan ethics is not limited to Irish sources. In the Mabinogion, there is an account of how a mortal chieftain named Pwyll secretly traded places with Arawn, the lord of the underworld, for a year. At the end of the year, Pwyll enquires as to how his kingdom was managed in his absence. His courtiers tell him,

Never was thy discernment so marked; never was thou so loveable a man thyself; never was thou so free in spending thy goods; never was thy rule better than during this year.

Note again, here, Pwyll's courtiers are impressed by the personal qualities of the man they thought was Pwyll himself. Rationality, generosity, and worthiness for admiration (which is an ancient definition of honour) are named in particular. Similar expressions of the primacy of character over law and over consequences can be found in Scandinavian, Germanic, and Greek mythology, and in classical Greek philosophy. It's worth reiterating that the aim of Virtue is not to follow a moral law, but to produce a certain kind of person, that is, a person who has the virtues, and who lives in accord with the virtues. To someone committed to this way of thinking, the question of ethics, What should I do?, really means, What kind of person should I be? Tied to identity, Virtue ethics reaches to the most intimate places in our sense of selfhood.
This, of course, invites the question, Which virtues should make it to the list? What is a virtue? What distinguishes virtues from vices? In looking at the ancient literary sources like the Instructions of Cormac, the most that can usually be said to answer those questions is, 'the virtues are the character-qualities which you find on the list.' There are several lists to choose from: the Instructions of Cormac and the Testament of Morann are only two of them. But there are a few qualities which are found on the majority of lists. Historian Ronald Hutton says that the essential virtues of heroic societies, found on almost all lists, are Courage, Generosity, and Loyalty. In research of my own, which I conducted before I read Hutton's research, I came to similar a similar conclusion: on my list were Honour, Friendship, Courage, Trust, Hospitality, Generosity, and Love. I don't see these as incompatible lists: indeed some of the virtues on my list may be treated as variations or special cases of one of the virtues on Hutton's list. Hospitality is obviously a species of Generosity, for instance. For most practical questions of ethics, it is usually good enough to simply pick the list which best fits the society that you happen to live in, and the place in that society which you happen to occupy, and then learn the virtues on it. But for philosophical purposes, it is important to ask which list is the best one, why certain virtues make it to the list, and why other ones are struck off. What, if anything, gives these lists of virtue their coherence and unity? Are they just the qualities which happened to have been accepted by the people of that time and place? If the answer is 'yes', that may suggest that some form of relativism is in play. But there is a definite, non-relativist structure of logic at work here, and the heroic virtues were not chosen at random. They are the qualities which are necessary for a person to properly fulfill the responsibilities of his or her role in a heroic society. Another way to put it might be, the virtues are the qualities of character necessary to sustain a certain

kind of community. Heroic virtues, therefore, are the qualities which sustain Heroic society. Similarly, Christian virtues like faith, hope, and charity sustain Christian society; Confucian qualities like humanity, righteousness, and the five relations sustain a certain kind of Chinese society. All virtues, in whatever list they are found on, have a social orientation like this. But let me focus on the matter of ancient European pagan societies.

2. The Social Orientation of Virtue

In the ancient heroic way of thinking, including Iron-age Celtic society, each person finds their sense of self, and their sense of purpose and belonging, within an ordered social realm that assigns to each person a role and a place. The primary ethical questions are, How do I be a good farmer, a good warrior, a good husband or wife, a good member of my tribe? What kind of actions and behaviours are expected from someone of my station and position? In later developments of Virtue thinking, when tribal warrior societies evolved into classical city-states, they also asked themselves, What does it mean to be a good human being as such? What kind of a person should I be?

Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the foremost scholars of Virtue today, observed the following about Heroic societies:

Every individual has a given role and status within a well-defined and highly determinate system of roles and statuses. The key structures are those of kinship and of the household. In such a society a man knows who he is by knowing his role in these structures, and in knowing this he knows also what he owes and what is owed to him by the occupant of every role and status. In Greek (dein) and in Anglo-Saxon (ahte) alike, there is originally no clear distinction between 'ought' and 'owe', in Icelandic the word 'Skyldr' ties together with 'ought' and 'is kin to'. But it is not just that there is for each status a prescribed set of duties and privileges. There is also a clear understanding of what actions are required to perform these and what actions fall short of what is required. For what are required are actions. A man in heroic society is what he does.

In another text, MacIntyre added that "To know what is required of you [in a heroic society] is to know what your place is within that structure and to do what your role requires." (MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, pg. 14) MacIntyre was speaking of Homeric Greek society, not the society of the Celtic Druids, but he observes that a similar point obtains for almost all Heroic societies of ancient Europe, including Irish Celtic society. (ibid pg. 122). The point to learn here is that the value program of any ancient European pagan society is always socially oriented.

The social orientation of ancient virtue may not seem to sit well with one of the most fundamental values of our own time, namely, liberal individualism. Nonetheless there is a place for an individualism, of a sort, in heroic society. Members of heroic societies, and especially the warriors, were obsessed with personal honour and renown (in Greek, the word is kudos, 'glory'; in Irish, it's enech or oineach, 'face'). But even this apparent individualism still has a social orientation: for the way to achieve personal glory is to do things which benefit others. Conspicuous courage and daring, especially on a battlefield, can earn the hero glory. While courage requires the exercise of personal powers, such as the ability to contain fear, it was considered honourable when it was exercised in the service of protecting kinfolk and family, as well as loyalty to one's chieftain. This kind of individualism appears, for instance, in the practice of the Single Combat, where entire battles would be decided by the outcome of skirmishes between one fighter at a time from each side. The story of the 'Combat between Ferdiad and Cu Chullain' in the Táin Bo Cuailnge, is an example of this,

although that story also includes the extra dramatic tension of two foster-brothers and best friends fighting each other to the death. Something like individualism also appears in the understanding that leadership rests on the personal qualities of the chieftain himself. This is explicit in the wisdom texts which I have already cited. Incidentally, this understanding of leadership, tied to the personality of the leader, also obtains in Aboriginal societies. Historian Daniel Paul, member of the Mi'kmaq Nation (of Nova Scotia Canada) wrote that among his people:

…a leader had to earn the right to lead. The standards were rigid for men who aspired to leadership. Aspirants had to be compassionate, honourable, intelligent, brave, and wise. The term of office was indeterminate, and if a leader conducted himself well, his leadership could continue until death.

Notice the use of the vocabulary of virtue in the description. The authority of the leader stems not from his occupation of an office, from which the man himself may be distinguished. It stems primarily from his personal qualities.
Hospitality and generosity are also counted among the very highest of virtues. One of the things expected of a chieftain was to be constantly giving gifts to his followers, and to be very liberal in the re-distribution of the tribe's wealth. To give someone a gift is not only to praise the recipient, but also to demonstrate one's ability to give. By gift-giving, honour and glory is assigned to both recipient and to giver. In the story of the Caith Maigh Tuireadh, one may recall that King Bres' lack of generosity causes his downfall. The vassal chiefs among the Tuatha de Dannan, angry with him for his miserliness, conspired to depose him by means of satirical poetry. Embarrassed and humiliated to the point where physical blemishes burst out on his face, Bres was forced to resign. As another example, at the end of the story of the Colloquy of the Two Sages, a younger poet named Athairne was made chief poet but, in the worlds of Lady Gregory: "No one had any great liking for him, for he was too fond of riches, and was no way hospitable or open-handed." (Gregory, Cuchullain of Muirthemney, pg. 390). His punishment was social isolation. Three magical talking birds were placed at his door, which would tell visitors to go away. The overall point here is that in the ancient way of thinking, all virtues are inherently social qualities. They have built-in systems of punishments and rewards associated with how well, or how poorly, someone fulfills the requirements of his social role. A purely internal and individual understanding of honour, defined as we do today in terms of personal freedom and integrity, had not yet been invented.

3. Could Virtue have an Aesthetic Orientation?

So far I have not said anything that will be particularly new to philosophers who study virtue. All I have done is describe two major features of the ethical discourse of Virtue in Heroic society. But I am not advocating an uncritical, wholesale revival of the list of virtues found in these sources, for two reasons. The first has to do with a problem of logic. Earlier I said that virtues, in Heroic society, are the qualities of character necessary for the fulfillment of one's social role. This invites the interpretation that the virtues of a heroic society are merely professional skills associated with social roles, and therefore not true virtues. They provide a means to separate the right from the wrong in terms of whatever social role they are assigned to. But they do not separate right from wrong in terms of morality as such. They may teach how to be a good farmer, a good blacksmith, a good chieftain, and so on. But they say nothing about what it is to be a good human being. As observed by Alasdair MacIntyre,

…a virtue is not a disposition that makes for success only in some one particular type of situation. What are spoken of as the virtues of a good committee man or of a good administrator or of a gambler or a pool hustler are professional skills professionally deployed in those situations where they can be effective, not virtues.

MacIntyre's point is that the virtues are not the same as professional skills. A virtue is a quality of character that can manifest in any situation at any time in someone's life. In terms of the Celtic sources, we could argue that the virtues of the chieftain, the highest ranking and most prestigious social role in ancient Celtic society, and the role responsible for the functioning of all other social roles, can be taken as the virtues of a human being as such. This is an elegant and straightforward means to overcome this problem, and a useful way to translate ancient Celtic ethical ideas into the present day. In the past I have argued for just such a position myself.

However, there is a second problem here, which has to do with the content of the moral teachings themselves. Some of the values of ancient Celtic society simply do not belong in the modern world. Cormac's remarks about women, for instance, are profoundly stereotypical and misogynist. And the ancient Celtic ethical paradigm is rather aristocratic: it favours the life of the warrior nobility, and their militaristic virtues. It therefore appears to offer very little to the working class. And it sometimes excludes virtues which, today, we may have reason to value very highly. We today may wish to count patience, and compassion, and gentleness, as heroic virtues.

At the same time, I also think it would be unwise to cherry-pick the literary sources in order to produce a view of Druidic ethics which satisfies a contemporary preference. For one thing, we may end up projecting modern values on to those sources, and thus we may come to a false or a misleading understanding of what those sources really say. For another, we cannot pretend that we are living in the Iron Age. And there is a third, more important reason. Contemporary Druids, or contemporary people on a Druidic path, are (among other things) people who are reviving a body of ideas from several past cultures. Those cultures include the Iron-age Celtic people, the pre-Celtic Neolithic culture which built all of the wonderful stone circles and passage mounds, and a number of early modern British antiquarians and freemasons and the like. Yet this revival is justified by a program of independent reasoning on the part of the people undertaking it. The only logically consistent way for a contemporary person to adopt some or all of the world view of an older culture, without at the same time losing his hold on present-day reality, is by appealing to reasons not found in that older world view which he seeks to revive. In other words: when a modern person chooses to revive or adopt a Druidic path of life, he or she does so for thoroughly modern reasons. He accepts the parts of the older world view which fit a modern world view. He rejects those parts of the older world view which do not fit a modern world view. Our modern world view includes some values which ancient Celtic people almost certainly would not share with us: values like human rights, individualism, capitalism, utilitarianism, perhaps even parliamentary democracy itself. Additionally, the ancient Celtic world view included ideas that no one today is seriously interested in reviving, such as head-hunting, and the blood feud, and the ritual sacrifice of living human beings.

I think we ought not to disguise this process from ourselves. I also think we can use it to our advantage. Our ideas may be inspired by the past, and indeed they may gain power through such inspiration. But it is important that the ideas we live by are founded on our own exercise of reason, and on the experiences of our own eyes and ears. That way, any problems arising from the selection, translation, or interpretation of ancient texts will (likely) not correspond to conceptual or logical problems in our principles. Nor will they necessarily correspond to fields of tension and conflict within our community. A short study of the history of

Christianity will reveal many problems that can be created by differing interpretations of a text. Moreover, guided first and foremost by our own minds and senses, it is more likely that we will arrive at ideas about ethics that are intellectually appealing, spiritually uplifting, and of course capable of responding to contemporary moral problems.

I have just such an idea myself. It is inspired by ancient Celtic virtue, among other sources. But it is firmly rooted in an original observation of my own, which I think is there to be discovered by anyone who does the same kind of enquiring work as I did to find it. I would like to describe it to you now.

A little while ago I was watching television highlights of great moments in the history of football. (Since I am presenting this paper in England, I thought I had better mention football somewhere in here.) In 1995, Columbian goalkeeper Rene Higuita defended a ball heading into his net by jumping forward into a handstand, and blocking the ball with the soles of his feet. It was an amazing sight to see. And on his face afterwards was the most wonderful expression of bliss. This athlete thoroughly enjoyed the use of his body and delighted in its powers.

On another occasion, I had the opportunity to watch an elderly woodcarver making a cabinet, without using power tools. The man was patient and quiet, and went about the work slowly. He would frequently stop to just look at his work in progress, and silently think about it. Yet he had a sense of focus and total unity of purpose which was a wonder to behold. A few days later, when I saw the finished product, it seemed to me that more than just a material object was presented to me. I could 'see', so to speak, the care and the love which went into it.

Before that, I was visiting the Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto Canada. On display that day was a painting by Lawren Harris of an overcast sky at twilight, where each band of cloud was just slightly darker than the next one. It was a still image, made from oil-based paint on canvas, but it seemed animated: it seemed as if I could actually watch the sun set, or rise, over the land.

On one level, each of these actions was practical. A football was prevented from entering the net. A cabinet was built. A painting was sold to a patron, so that the artist could make his living, and then sold to a gallery, so the patron could profit on his investment. But there is more to it than that. The football goalkeeper could have just caught the ball in his hands. The carpenter could have finished his work a lot faster using machines. Lawren Harris could have painted his beaver swamp to look like a photograph, or a surveyor's map. But that is not what these people did. Instead, they created something beautiful.

In the Irish story of Cu Chullain's courtship of Emer, there is a list of the various skills that were taught to the apprentices at Scathach's school for heroes. Here is the list from the Táin itself:

So Cuchullain's training with Scathach in the craft of arms was done: what with the apple-feat – juggling nine apples with never more than one in his palm: the thunder-feat; the feats of the sword-edge and the sloped shield; the feats of the javelin and rope; the body-feat; the feat of the Cat and the heroic salmon-leap; the pole-throw and the leap over a poisoned stroke; the noble chariot-fighter's crouch; the gae bolga; the spurt of speed; the feat of the chariot-wheel thrown on high and the feat of the shield-rim; the breath-feat, with gold apples blown up into the air; the snapping mouth and the hero's scream; the stroke of precision; the stunning-shot and the cry-stroke; stepping on a lance in flight and straightening erect on its point; the sickle-chariot; and the trussing of a warrior on the points of spears.

This impressive list of athletic stunts which Cu Chullain and the other warrior apprentices learned from Scathach constitute technical skills for warriors. Skills like these may thus fall into the logical problem described earlier: as professional skills deployed in the service of a

specific and practical purpose, they are not true virtues. However they are, it seems to me, analogous to the outstanding acrobatics that are sometimes observed at international sporting events, and to outstanding works of art and craftsmanship as well. The Salmon Leap, and other heroic feats, were on one level practical – they got the job done – but on another level they were probably beautiful to watch. Hence, I think, why they received the theatrical names that they bear.

Similarly, in Irish custom bards and musicians were expected to have three highly specialized skills known as the Three Noble Strains: lullabies to induce sleep, laments to induce tears, and satires to induce laughter. In Irish Brehon law, the ability to perform these three types was expected of the cruit, the harper, the only entertainer in old Irish society with independent legal standing. The Three Noble Strains could constitute technical skills for musicians: but they too are beautiful. We appreciate them not just because they have specific practical effects. We value them because there is something about them which gives both performer and audience a certain special kind of satisfaction. They make you feel not just that the job was done well, but that the job had to be done that way, could only have been done that way, that no other way of doing it would have been right. And we enjoy that feeling. Just as in the case of the football player, the carpenter, and the painter, the beauty of the action was not a matter of superfluous ornamentation. The beauty of the act somehow configured the action itself. It's difficult to find the words in English to express this idea. In the Greek, we have words like arête, usually translated directly as 'virtue' but also meaning 'excellence'. There is also the concept of 'to kalon', which is usually translated as 'the noble', but can also mean what is 'fitting', 'praiseworthy' or even 'beautiful'. This discourse brings us into a different field of philosophy – aesthetics – and to the suggestion that in some circumstances, or for some purposes, the good and the beautiful intersect each other. I'm not suggesting that pagan virtue is associated with hedonism, although as a point of historical interest, that association has often been made. I'm suggesting, rather, that virtue is associated with art: in that a virtuous person crafts her actions, and indeed her sense of identity and character, in much the same way that a composer crafts a symphony, a writer crafts a poem or a story, an artist of any kind crafts a work of art. For to learn a virtue is not to learn a set of rules. To learn a virtue is to learn a way of holding yourself or having yourself; a way of presenting yourself to others, a way of being in the world. Might it be the case that just as a stonemason fashions a wall, or a potter fashions a jar, so does a virtuous person fashion herself? And might it be the case that just as an artist creates the painting, or the sonata, or the dramatic performance, for the sake of beauty, so does the virtuous person craft herself for the sake of beauty?

I think this possibility does not lead the discourse on virtue to a conclusion. Rather, I think it opens up new questions like, What is beauty? Why do we like beautiful things? Is there anything that ethics and ethical choices can have in common with art, and artistic choices? Already I perceive various problems. For one thing, it is not certain that all works of art have something in common with each other. It might be fairly obvious, for instance, that five hundred balloons tied up in a giant pile and installed in the concourse of a shopping mall is not art. (I saw just such a thing as part of the 2007 Nuit Blanche exhibition in Toronto's Eaton Centre). Yet it may be difficult to say exactly why such a thing is not art. There might not be any common, uniquely definitive quality that such a thing shares with all other works of art, and only with other works of art. But by asking the right questions, and exploring the answers in a rigorous way, I hope to discover whether there is any philosophical support for the hypothesis that sometimes, the right thing to do is that which is performed beautifully, perhaps even performed for the sake of beauty. A concern for beauty is already a well understood part of human life. Any study of pottery techniques, for instance, will reveal that craftspeople are always interested in more than just the utilitarian purpose of their handiwork.

But what I have in mind is something that informs an entire world-view on ethics. My question now is: in addition to its social orientation, does Heroic and/or Druidic Virtue also have an aesthetic orientation?

4. The Classical Aesthetic

I know it may be strange, in a paper allegedly about Druidic ethics, for me to talk about Greek philosophers. But the relevance will (hopefully) be clear by the time I'm done. And anyway by doing so I'm participating in a tradition of sorts, which begins in the 1700's and the early revival of British Druidry. Writers like Aubry, Toland, and the like, were perfectly happy to draw from classical Greek and Roman sources. Therefore, I'm going to take you to Rome, in the 3rd century C.E. There we will meet the last of the great mystical pagan philosophers, Plotinus, a highly learned man who studied under the great Ammonias Saccas at the famous Library of Alexandria. The school of thought he and his followers are creating will eventually be called Neoplatonism. It will prove enormously influential on all sorts of people for centuries to come, including the 18th century founders of the British Druidic revival. Godfrey Higgins, Lewis Spence, and Aneurin Vardd, for instance, all quoted Origen, who was a student of Plotinus. My question for this section is: what, if anything, does the classical understanding of aesthetics contribute to Druidic virtue ethics?
Plotinus began his philosophical career by building upon Plato's Theory of the Forms. This theory holds that all things in the visible world are illusions, imperfect reflections of something else that is more real, just like images in waters or in mirrors are the imperfect copies of the things they reflect. For Plotinus, like Plato before him, the true reality is an eternal and transcendental 'Eidos'. The word is usually translated as 'Form'; Plotinus uses the word Intellectual-Being. An eidos is like an archetype, but it is not just someone's conceptual abstraction. It exist in a transcendental realm that is knowable to us not by the senses, but only by the rational mind. The world as it appears to our senses is, in this 'view', unreal, illusory, a mere shadow on the wall of a cave. The world that is grasped by the rational mind, the world of the Forms, is eternal, immaterial, unchanging, permanent. Therefore, so the argument goes, it is the true reality of which the visible world is a mere reflection. As Plotinus says, "From beginning to end all is gripped by the Forms of the Intellectual Realm." Given this philosophical background, Plotinus defines Beauty like this:

…all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form [to eidos]. All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine Thought… But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into co-operation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.

In other words, Beauty is a property of that which is a unified, self-contained totality. But only the Forms can be self-contained totalities. For nothing in the visible, mortal world 'has' itself so completely as the Forms do. Only the Forms, therefore, are beautiful; and any beautiful thing in the world owes its beauty to the way it is in-formed by the Forms. To further demonstrate his point: Plotinus invites the reader to:

…make a mental picture of our universe: each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart, yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view, say the outer orb of the heavens, shall bring immediately with it the vision, on the one plane,

of the sun and all the stars with earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited upon a transparent globe.

Only this totality, says Plotinus, has true Being; only this holistic vision of the universe truly is. Therefore, he says, only this totality is beautiful. It's not quite right to say that in Plotinus' vision, beauty is a property of the totality of Being. Rather, it's the case that in the totality, Being and Beauty merge into a single concept, a single intellectual understanding, and become one and the same. In his words:

Beauty without Being could not be, nor Being voided of beauty; abandoned of Beauty, Being loses something of its essence. Being is desirable because it is identical with Beauty; and Beauty is loved because it is Being. How then can we debate which is the cause of the other, where the nature is one?

This vision informs many of the ideas that mystics and occultists both east and west, both Christian and Pagan, have of ecstatic unity with God, with enlightenment and release. Plotinus' student and main biographer, Porphyry, said that he personally observed Plotinus achieve an enlightened state of consciousness by means of this meditation four times. Furthermore, this is the vision which was picked up in later centuries by Augustine, and other Christian philosophers, and became known as the Argument of the First Cause, one of several great 'Proofs' of the existence of God. (Thus Christianity cannot claim that this argument is an original Christian idea. It's actually a Pagan idea. But I digress.)
With respect to Druidry: a similar vision was also described by Iolo Morgannwg, and included in the Barddas. A discourse in the Barddas which begins with the question, 'What is God?', offers the following:

God mercifully, out of love and pity, uniting himself with the lifeless, that is, the evil, with the intention of subduing it unto life, imparted the existence of vitality to animated and living beings, and thus did life lay hold of the dead, whence intellectual animations and vitality first sprang. And intellectual existences and animations began in the depths of Annwn, for there is the lowest and least grade… Thus may be seen that there is to every intellectual existence a necessary gradation, which necessarily begins at the lowest grade, professing from thence incessantly along every addition, intervention, increase, growth and age, and completion, unto conclusion and extremity, where it rests for ever from pure necessity, for there can not be any thing further or higher or better in respect of gradation and Abred.

This discourse asserts that Being emerges from lower orders of existence, rather than emanates from higher orders, as Plotinus claimed. But it still holds that an immaterial, eternal and intellectual being, here named God, is responsible for the existence of the world. The only significant difference is that in the Barddas, God starts at the bottom, rather than at the top. Morgannwg also asserts, like Plotinus, that the highest and most perfect grade of existence is purely intellectual. He also asserts that the material world and the lower orders of existence are impure and imperfect. And he holds that God dwells in a purely disembodied, spiritual realm, called Abred, the contemplation of which brings enlightenment.
The connection between ethics and this mystical aesthetics is as follows. Just as beautiful things in the world are but reflections or representations of that greater Beauty of the totality, so too are certain ethical principles. Plotinus says,

This is why Zeus, although the oldest of the gods and their sovereign, advances first (in the Phaedrus myth) towards that vision, followed by gods and demigods and such souls as are of

strength to see… intently gazing one sees the fount and principle of Justice, another is filled with the sight of Moral Wisdom, the original of that quality as found, sometimes at least, among men, copied by them in their degree from the divine virtue which, covering all the expanse, so to speak, of the Intellectual-Realm is seen, last attainment of all, by those who have known already many splendid visions.

In other words, ethical concepts like justice are also reflections or representations of the greater Beauty of the totality. The intersection between the good and the beautiful occurs in this cosmic intellectual and spiritual vision in which all things, including ourselves and our ethical concepts, owe their being to a singular transcendental Source which is Beautiful, and which is the Being of the world. An act of justice, or generosity, or courage, and so on, is a good act and at the same time a beautiful act, because it reflects the very highest and best facet of that vision. It shares in the beauty and the being of the totality. In the Barddas, Morgannwg also asserts that this beatific vision of the whole cosmos has ethical significance: for he says that "God is absolute good, in that he totally annihilates evil, and there cannot be in Him the least particle of the nature of evil."

Understanding Beauty in this Neoplatonic way, what then might it mean for virtue to have an aesthetic orientation? It may mean that the virtuous person is one who models herself and her character after the image of the cosmic vision. The virtuous person is the sort of person who, by means of intellectual and mystical vision, is able to perceive the Forms in the perfect and eternal realm where they dwell. The virtuous person is also the person who embodies in her character the virtues which reflect that higher reality.

I think the vision of Plotinus, the Barddas, and the classical tradition, is magnificent. I cannot help but be amazed by it, and amazed by the intellectual and imaginative powers of those philosophers who bequeathed it to us. However, I am deeply skeptical about what this vision can teach us about ethics. For ethical concepts and principles do not emerge from mystical visions. They emerge from practical human relationships: be they social, economic, political, or interpersonal. Ethical principles emerge from the meeting place between individuals and between groups, and between human beings and the greater immensities of the world in which they live. These meetings do not take place in the abstract world of spiritual visions. They take place in the thick of the material world, with all of its problems, imperfections, conflicts, and distractions. Mystical visions of higher spiritual realities call for the preceptor to turn his mind precisely away from the mortal realm, away from the very place where our ethical concepts matter most. I recognise that visions of global inter-connectedness and cosmic unity are capable of inspiring important ethical ideas like universal compassion and peace. This is part of the message of the great religions of the East, like Hinduism and Buddhism, and mystical forms of Islam such as Sufism. Yet the unity of the world and the presence of the divine is not a commandment to be obeyed. For the universe does not teach anything: the universe just is. The unity of the world and the presence of the divine is a question to be answered and a problem to be resolved. Ethical ideas like universal compassion emerge from the human response to the vision of cosmic unity, and in the human interpretation of that vision. We belong to the Earth and we are members of a global and cosmic togetherness: but the ethical significance of that membership is a product of our own thinking and our own dialogue with the other people who share it.

Therefore, insofar as beauty is attributed to that higher, immaterial, spiritual realm, it cannot also be attributed in the same systematic way to our ethical values. A comprehensive spiritual vision of the world, while it may be beautiful, does not provide a sound enough connection between aesthetics and ethics. But there are other conceptions of aesthetics which may be helpful here.

5. The Modern Aesthetic

The word ‘aesthetics’ was crafted in 1735 by Alexander Baumgarten, who defined beauty as ‘a sensible perfection’. It is sensible because it has to do with the activity of our senses: it is something to look at, to listen to, or touch. It is perfect because, as Baumgarten would have understood the meaning of the word ‘perfect’, it exists for its own sake. The work of art does not point to anything beyond itself, nor does it require the observer to assume anything other than what is presented. There does not need to be any reference to a cosmic or spiritual higher reality, of which the beautiful thing is merely a representation. The beautiful thing, on this understanding, is a whole world unto itself. Indeed Baumgarten uses that very simile: a work of art is like a world. Corresponding to the perfection of the work of art is the perfection of the aesthetic experience. The observer, in adopting an aesthetic attitude, suspends his or her utilitarian concerns of what the work is ‘for’. He lets it be what it is. Having disengaged from utilitarian concerns, the person who beholds a work of art can become absorbed in it, even enraptured in it, and can enjoy the experience for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else that the person may care about. Philosopher Erwin Panofsky explained this principle as follows:

When a man looks at a tree from the point of view of a carpenter, he will associate it with the various uses to which he might put the wood; and when he looks at it from the point of view of an ornithologist, he will associate it with the birds that might nest in it. When a man at a horse race watches the animal on which he has put his money, he will associate its performance with his desire that it may win. Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically.

This understanding presupposes the phenomenology of Heidegger, who argued that there are no perceptions of the world not bound up with the observer’s projects and interests. Yet Panofsky’s idea here is that when we look at something aesthetically, we do not associate it or relate it to our interests and intentions. Indeed we do not associate it with anything other than itself. Rather, we just let it be itself. We let it speak to us on its own terms. We enjoy the sight of something that is complete in itself. If some part of it seems out of place or inconsistent compared to another part, then we go looking for how it fits in the totality; and if we find that it does fit, we experience pleasure.
There is, it seems, some empirical evidence for this. In the world of biology and ecology, for instance, there is a recurring mathematical pattern that can be observed in things like the number of branches on a tree, or petals in a rose, or the proportions in the spiral of a seashell. This pattern is called the Fibonacci Sequence. Each number in the sequence is the sum of the previous two numbers in the sequence. Furthermore the ratio between any two adjacent numbers is always the same: 1.615. This number is called the Golden Mean. Even in the ancient world, people knew about this mathematical relation. It probably passes beneath the notice of someone who gives a rose to his girlfriend. But it’s there, and its presence is part of the beauty of the flower. Here’s another example of the beauty of sensible complete-ness. The British developmental psychologist Alan Slater found that people with symmetrical faces tend to be perceived as more attractive, even by babies who are too young to have learned aesthetic standards from popular culture and the media. Symmetry is a property of sensible perfections. The shape of a face, as well as the symmetry of trees and plants, and the ratio of the Golden Mean, and so on, is a feature of natural bodies. Yet we find the same principle deliberately inserted into some of the most beautiful man-made works of art. During the early Druidic revival in Britain, John Aubrey and William Stukeley made observations about mathematically harmonious proportions in British megalithic monuments such as Avebury and Stonehenge. Ross Nichols, in The Book of Druidry, thought he could see diamond shapes and vescia shapes in the proportions of Stonehenge, and he compared them to the dimensions

and proportions of other great world monuments, including the Pyramids of Giza. The mathematical elegance of harmonious ratios and proportions, also a property of sensible perfections, probably passes beneath the conscious notice of most visitors. But it's there, and everyone sees it, and that is a large reason why the monument is regarded as such a magical place.

The idea that beauty is a sensible perfection has become one of the dominant schools of thought in the philosophical study of aesthetics today. For the sake of convenience, let us call it the 'modern' view. Might there be a relation between this view of art, and virtue? Certainly, it is not just works of art which we call beautiful because of an apparent self-contained perfection. We are also impressed by actions, and we are impressed by the people who perform them. Many of the most important Celtic virtues named in texts like the Instructions of Cormac, such as honour, integrity, strength, courage, and so on, are valued not just because they produce good consequences. We also value them because we enjoy seeing people doing virtuous things. We feel a kind of satisfaction and delight with, for example, the sight of a mother singing her child to sleep, or a soldier on a helicopter winch cable pulling someone from a capsized boat, or an environmental activist cleaning a bird that was caught in an oil slick. We experience the same kind of aesthetic satisfaction from observing acts of compassion, or generosity, or courage, as we do observing Shakespearean dramas, or Renaissance paintings, or Romantic symphonies. Drama and literature may be a particularly effective example: we find narrative and dramatic art beautiful precisely because of the actions of the characters. As contemporary French philosopher Ricoeur says, "It is in literary fiction that the connection between action and its agent is easiest to perceive and that literature proves to be an immense laboratory for thought experiments in which this connection is submitted to an endless number of imaginative variations."

Having said all that, however, the notion of 'modern' art need not have any necessary relation to ethics. It is part of the modern understanding of aesthetics that art is an autonomous activity, without any kind of necessary relationship to anything outside of itself: including ethics, including the society the artist lives in, including even the artist herself. Therefore art is entirely exempt from criticism on ethical grounds. To say that some work of art is good or bad, is meaningless, except perhaps as an emotive expression of personal aesthetic preference. It is meaningless even to say that it is right or wrong to make art of any kind in the first place. Correspondingly, if ethics was a matter of doing that which is beautiful, then it would be wrong to judge what people do as good or bad, just so long as beauty was the aim of the action. Thus, an action which ordinary intuition would describe as shockingly violent, but which was performed with grace or flair, such as any of the Celtic warrior feats described earlier, we would have to concede might be beautiful. This categorical contrast between ethics and aesthetics was summed up by philosopher Thomas Mann like this:

In the final analysis, there are only two basic attitudes, two points of view: the aesthetic and the moral. Socialism is a strictly moral world-view. Nietzsche, on the other hand, is the most uncompromisingly perfect aesthete in the history of thought.

Thomas Mann uses the word 'socialism' here, although one who studies his ideas would see that what he has in mind the idea that ethics is highly deontological. To him, ethics is the articulation of laws of social co-operation, founded upon reason. He refers to Friedrich Nietzsche as an uncompromisingly perfect aesthete – but he is not exactly singing Nietzsche's praise. His point is that a purely aesthetic world view has to be indifferent to the claims of morality, and that aesthetic purposes and standards are not subject to analysis in terms of good and evil. And for Mann, this is a serious problem. If morality and beauty have nothing to do with each other, it might be possible to dominate and exploit and sacrifice

people for the sake of art. Someone might find it necessary to inflict cruelty on others, or do works of destruction, in order to produce something of beauty: and by reason of the aim for beauty, never be called to account for his actions. It is not difficult to find historical examples of this. The grandeur and glory of Imperial Rome's architectural monuments were made possible by slave labour. The textile and clothing industry, even today, depends greatly upon the supply of cheap indentured workers in sweatshop factories in third-world countries. One could also look at the diamond importing industry, which has benefited so much from warfare in Africa. Insofar as the aesthetic life and the ethical life stand in contrast with each other, as Thomas Mann says they must, then the way will remain open for a Nietzschean vision where "the wretchedness of struggling men must grow still greater in order to make possible the production of a world of art for a small number of Olympian men".

As a result of this discourse, we could conclude that some good and virtuous things are beautiful. Yet some beautiful things are not virtuous. That conclusion seems to me correct, given the premises; but it is not definitive enough for me, and I think we can do better.

6. The Meeting-place of the Beautiful and the Good

Recall that my original philosophical question was whether it is possible to revive the ancient, pre-Christian notion of Virtue in a manner that makes sense in our time. My hypothesis was that such a project may be possible if, in addition to its social orientation, virtue also had an aesthetic orientation. Just as an artist crafts a work of art for the sake of beauty, so might a person craft herself. I've examined two theories of art in search of the meeting place between the beautiful and the good, and found both of them unsatisfactory. Yet I think my hypothesis is not yet dead.

For the ethical side: Thomas Mann's statement that there are two and only two categorically different ways to guide one's life, that is, by means of ethics or by means of art, is in my view a false dichotomy. He is wrong to presuppose that the only alternative to a moral point of view is a Nietzschean festival of cruelty. There are other moral attitudes which are not founded on obedience to laws, and yet are no less rational. The principles of virtue theory are among them.

For the aesthetic side: I find the modern view of beauty, as a sensible perfection, is incomplete. It does not explain why we find beauty in things which clearly do refer to things beyond themselves. Religious art provides the most obvious examples. An altar, an icon, a statue of a saint or a deity, or a painting that depicts a mythological event, gains its meaning precisely because it refers to the stories and histories of the gods, or even to the gods themselves, to whom the artist addresses herself by means of artistic creativity. There are many non-religious examples too. We might not properly appreciate the beauty of a symphony performance, for example, if not for the elegant concert hall, the tuxedoes, the rituals of applauding the conductor and the first violin as they enter. In April of 2007, Joshua Bell, regarded as one of the very best concert violinists in the world today, performed six of the world's most respected pieces of music, with a Stradivarius violin, in a Washington DC subway station. Only six people, out of thousands, stopped to listen. Everyone else completely ignored him. The social context of the performance therefore clearly matters: it contributes to our ability to appreciate the beauty of the music, and is part of the entire aesthetic 'package', so to speak, which we might find beautiful. A similar criticism applies to the appreciation of natural beauty. For no landscape in the world is a 'perfection' in the sense of being complete in itself. We know through the science of ecology that all living things are in various complicated ways connected and related to each other, and to the non-living elements in the atmospheres, soils, and waters. This interconnection between things is of course an important principle in Druidry, as many of today's most influential Druidic writers

affirm.
Two theories of art: both of them unsatisfactory for our purpose. I wonder if this is a sign that I have been asking the wrong questions. Perhaps it may be better to ask what it is about art and beauty that draws us and attracts us. Why do we create works of art? What is it we like about beauty? And what, if anything, can the answers to such questions tell us about ethics?
In his Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel asked the question: “What is man’s need to produce works of art?” His answer is expressed in the following parable.

A boy throws stones into the river, and then stands admiring the circles that trace themselves on the water, as an effect in which he attains the sight of something that is his own doing. This need traverses the most manifold phenomena, up to the mode of self-production in the medium of external things as it is known to us in the work of art. And it is not only external things that man treats in this way, but himself no less, i.e. his own natural form, which he does not leave as he finds it, but alters of set purpose… The universal need for expression in art lies, therefore, in man’s rational impulse to exalt the inner and outer world into a spiritual consciousness for himself, as an object in which he recognises his own self.

The idea here is that people create art in order to fulfill a need to render the world recognisable, intelligible, and our own. We create art in order to see ourselves, as if from outside, and thus to recognise and to know ourselves.
Premonitions of Nietzsche can be discerned here. In 1872, less than a hundred years after Hegel’s lectures, Nietzsche published his first book, The Birth of Tragedy. In it, he explained how the ancient Greeks saw the world as a rough and unpredictable place, full of violent storms, dangerous landscapes, wild animals, human criminals, tragic twists of fortune, and the inevitability of death. (By the way, various literary sources confirm that this was part of the world view of ancient Celtic people too.) Art, Nietzsche says, is what helps us to cope: art helps us to accept this reality, and go on living in this difficult world, without caving in to resignation, or terror. Art helps us cope with the world by elevating an image of ourselves to the level of the divine, re-presenting all human and natural life as if it is the life of the gods. Here are Nietzsche’s own words:

The Greeks knew and felt the fears and horrors of existence: in order to be able to live at all they had to interpose the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians between themselves and these horrors… In order to live, the Greeks were profoundly compelled to create those gods. We might imagine their origin as follows: the Apolline impulse to beauty led, in gradual stages, from the original Titanic order of the gods of fear to the Olympian order of the gods of joy, just as roses sprout on thorn-bushes. How else could life have been borne by a race so sensitive, so impetuous in their desires, so uniquely capable of suffering, if it had not been revealed to them, haloed in a higher glory, in their gods? The same impulse that calls art into existence, the complement and apotheosis of existence, also created the Olympian world with which the Hellenic ‘will’ held up a transfiguring mirror to itself. Thus the gods provide a justification for the life of man by living it themselves.
The idea here is that in the heroic mythology of the Olympian gods, people created art not only to see the fruit of their labours taking hold on the world, but to see represented images of themselves – elevated to a higher sphere, projected on to the cosmos. This mythological art interposes itself between the human realm and the natural realm, with all its transience and terror. Nietzsche is presupposing the work of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, a contemporary of his, and of Hegel’s, who argued that all religion is a re-presentation of ourselves and of human life in an idealized way. It is an act of projecting human qualities on

to God. But where Feuerbach thought that this meant all religion is therefore a contemptible fraud, Nietzsche thought this is something to celebrate. A god, as Nietzsche saw it (at least in his earlier writings) is an artistic reflection or representation of humanity as something divine. That representation of human life was a justification of human life.
Let's look at an example from the Celtic world. In the second century CE, a chieftain from the west of Ireland named Conn of the Hundred Battles invaded the agriculturally rich Boyne Valley, in Ireland's east province, Leinster. There he established a new kingdom, Meath (or 'middle'), with the Hill of Tara as his new capital. He also declared himself 'Ard-Ri', or High King, of all Ireland. Conn seems to have brought with him a goddess called Maeve, a name which means 'she who intoxicates'; this goddess was also called An Mhórrigan, which means 'Queen of Phantoms' or 'Great Queen'. In the story of the Caith Maigh Tuireadh, 'the Battle of Moytura', she is represented as the paramour of a sky-god, An Daghda ('the Good God' and 'Father of All'). The story of their sexual mating is the story of the heat and light of the sun in the early springtime, uniting with the water of streams and rivers, to fertilize the land. Irish folklorist Dáithí Ô h-Ôgáin said of that story: "Notwithstanding its burlesque flavour, this account can be taken to be a residue of an old tradition which had the Daghda uniting with a water-goddess to fertilise the land." (Ô h-Ôgáin, The Sacred Isle, pg. 64). His explanation continues as follows:

It is clear that a goddess, representing the soil and its irrigation, and variously called Danu and Ríoghain, was taken to be the partner of the ancestral sun-deity… Under her title of Mor-Ríoghain, this primal goddess, in addition to agricultural prosperity, is given other functions in connection with the landscape. For instance, the remains of ancient cooking-sites were associated with her.

By the way, this mythology of a goddess of waters or landscapes uniting with a god of the sun or the sky to procure the fertility of the earth appears to be a nearly universal theme in the ancient world. It is attested by James Frazer in The Golden Bough, and by Mircea Eliade in The Myth of the Eternal Return.
The point of that example is to show how ancient people responded to the world they saw around them by crafting a mythology full of sacred relationships. There are relationships between the sky god and the river goddess, and this relationship was said to govern the natural forces which configure the transience of the world into a meaningful order. There are relationships between the gods and the human community, and this relationship governs how people configure their ways of life. Nietzsche's claim that a mythology of this kind serves to justify human life, is probably right, yet I think a little overstated. Ancient people probably didn't decide how they wanted to live, and thereafter proceed to create a world of mythology to justify their decision. Rather, I think it more likely that the process of creating mythology and creating a way of life happened at the same time, with each activity symbiotically contributing to the other. The notion of a sky god and an earth goddess making love to each other is grounded in observable environmental facts. Yet it is also a human relationship, which people can have between each other. The purpose of mythology is not only, not simply, to project on to the cosmos a human image. It is also to frame the facts of life in an aesthetic presentation, so that we may find life-affirming responses to them.
The rationale for creating a mythology like this, according to Hegel and Nietzsche, is to know ourselves. In a complicated and ever-changing world, we create art in order to know where we fit. Yet art is only two parts discovery. It is also three parts invention. An artist does not simply represent things as he finds them. He also makes choices. He selects the colour, the texture, the point of view, and so on. Even in an art form as conspicuously 'representational' as portrait painting, the person featured in the portrait has to be posed. Similarly, mythology

not only helps us find our place in the world: it also helps to create that place. Each activity contributes to the other. I suspect that the intersection between art and ethics may be found in precisely the place where self-discovery and self-creation come together. For especially in Virtue ethics, self-discovery and self-creation also come together. And when we today create art, just as when ancient people created mythology, it is precisely to situate ourselves, to place ourselves, or to locate ourselves somewhere in the world. It is to create the place in the world where we discover that we belong.

To Hegel's question, 'What is man's need to produce works of art?' there is a corresponding ethical question, 'What is our need to produce principles of ethics?'. Might a corresponding answer suggest itself? A philosopher committed to Utilitarianism or to Deontology might say, 'Ethical principles are there to show us the difference between what is right and wrong'. One committed to the Virtues would agree. But as stated before, a virtue is not just a rule of proper behaviour. It is also a mode of self expression. Practicing a virtue is not like obeying a moral law. It is more like practicing a talent or a skilled trade, yet it is also more than that, since talents and skills are not virtues. As Aristotle wrote, just as one who learns the skills and practices associated with farming becomes a farmer, or those associated with medicine becomes a doctor, so does one who learns the virtues become a virtuous human being. We do not just follow our virtues. We become our virtues. For when we select, develop, and practice a virtue, we select and practice nothing less than a way of being in the world, and of relating to the things and people of world. The corresponding question could thus be re-phrased like this: 'What is our need to practice virtue?' And it seems to me the answer is exactly the same as the answer to Hegel's question about art: 'to know ourselves'.

We today, in possession of better scientific knowledge about how the world works, cannot craft the same kind of mythology as did ancient people. But we can recognise in mythology the same philosophical process by which we, today, both discover and create ourselves. It is a basic principle of (modern) Druidry, affirmed by some of the movement's most influential contemporary writers, that each human being, and the whole of human society, is bound up in various relationships with the natural environment and the world around us. Some of these relationships are ecological: for instance, the sharing of the air we breathe and the water we drink with all other forms of life on Earth. Some are social, such as the relationships with our families, ancestors, neighbours, and wider communities. We know we are a part of these relationships. But it may not always be entirely clear how we fit in. Are we stewards of the Earth? Or are we just passengers along for the ride? Are we symbiotes, whose actions contribute positively to the overall functioning of the Earth? Or are we parasites, whose actions generally harm the Earth-host? Is the earth a benevolent provider of our material and energy needs? Or is the Earth a hostile and demanding adversary, whose gifts have to be wrestled away? In our social relationships: are we all just separate individuals who happen to live on the same rock floating in space? Or are we members of a kind of extended social body? Do we relate to each other primarily through competition, or through compassion?

Art is the sustained exploration of precisely those kinds of questions: it is indeed the laboratory of ethics. It represents to us, in symbolic or representational form, ourselves in our many relationships in the world, and it often puts those relationships to the test by endlessly exploring variations and possibilities. Virtue is the exclamation of an answer to such questions; to practice a virtue is to practice a way of being in the world, and a way of participating in those relationships. And like art, virtue is three parts invention and two parts discovery. For by the selection, development, and practice of a virtue, not only do we discover what potentials we have within us, but we also deliberately translate those potentials into actions; and as such actions become habitual, so do they configure our very identities. In developing a virtue, we both discover what we are, and at the same time we choose to become what we are.

7. The Noble

I'd like to finish up by examining a philosophical concept which I think stands precisely at the intersection of the beautiful and the good. I speak of the concept of Arête, which as mentioned is sometimes translated as 'Virtue' itself, but can also mean the Excellent, or the Noble. It seems to me that just as beauty corresponds to art as the principle of excellence in art, so does Nobility correspond to Virtue as the principle of excellence in ethics.
This bring us back to the question of Beauty, and re-introduces the problems associated with the classical and the modern theories of aesthetics already described. One theory of art was mistaken about its relationship to ethics; the other categorically excluded any such relation. But I think that in a synthesis of the two, there may be a way to show how Beauty and the Noble can meet each other. Both the classical and the modern aesthetic characterize beauty as a quality of perfect relationships: where everything is harmonious, where nothing is superfluous and nothing missing. I'd like to retain that view. Beauty is something perfect, something complete in itself, something that is diminished if anything is either added or taken away. As in the classical model, a beautiful thing does refer the mind to other things beyond itself. But unlike the classical model, the beautiful thing need not refer to transcendental realities. As with the modern view, beauty appeals to the physical senses. Beauty is something of this world. But unlike the modern view, it is not just the completeness and the wholeness of the beautiful thing in itself which we find appealing. We are also impressed by the completeness of all the different relationships in which a beautiful thing is involved. These relationships may be internal to the beautiful thing or event, as in the case of the mathematical proportions of architecture or music, or the arrangement of figures and shapes and colours in a painting. But those relationships might be a reference to an event in history, as in the case of a painting like Vercingetorix Renders Unto Caesar by Lionel Royer. It might be an event in mythology, such as the portrait of Deirdre of the Sorrows by John Duncan. It might be a social context in which the presentation of beauty is rendered intelligible, such as the concert hall where the symphony is performed. Perhaps first and foremost among such relationships is that which obtains between the beautiful object or event, and you, the person experiencing it. I am not trying to create a new way to rephrase the old saying, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. For I think that saying, as a proposition, is false. Rather, I'm asserting that beauty dwells between the beholder's eye, and that which is beheld – when that between-space is well crafted and complete, nothing superfluous and nothing missing.
Surely that is the same for those whom we call 'noble people'! Leaving aside the pop-culture notions of bodily beauty, it is the beauty of his or her way of relating to others, her way of presenting herself to the world, her way of responding to other people and to the larger immensities of the world, which is the reason we admire her. That admiration for how a person dwells in the world shall be my suggestion for how virtue could have an aesthetic orientation. Virtue is oriented aesthetically insofar as the virtuous person selects, develops, and practices the qualities of character which contribute to the creation of a beautiful character. Someone who has a beautiful character is someone whose way of being in the world is artistically complete: nothing superfluous and nothing missing, just as in an excellent work of art.
The virtue of Nobility covers not just a single specific character virtue, but rather it describes a person who possesses and practices a system of inter-related virtues. Nobility is presented in someone's appearance, or comportment. It is more like a disposition of mind or spirit. Yet it is something that can be seen. Contemporary philosopher John Casey wrote, "Nobility is something that can be presented directly to the eye. It can appear (to use Hegelian language) 'in concrete form'." Casey uses the example of the statues of Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici on the tomb of San Lorenzo, and says of them: "The statues do not symbolize

nobility, or make us think of nobility. It would be truer to say that the nobility of the two figures is something we can actually see, and not something we infer." A similar claim can be made of the noble human being. You can see someone's nobility in the way she walks, or speaks, or gazes at other people. The noble human being 'has' herself completely: she is in full possession of herself. She knows who she is: and she likes who she is. She enjoys being herself. That enjoyment of selfhood is palpable, visible. She does not simply practice the virtues: much like great works of art, the noble person embodies the virtues in her visible presence.

That is how the idea of the Noble appeals to the senses, as do works of art and beauty. The notion of beauty as a 'perfection', a completeness-in-itself, which is found in both classical and modern theories of aesthetics, may also be important here. Aristotle's own definition of Virtue included an idea now known as the Doctrine of the Mean. This doctrine holds that a choice or an action is virtuous if it manifests only the right amount of whatever the circumstance calls for: no more, and no less. A vice is either too much, or not enough, of what is called for. Here are Aristotle's own words on the matter:

Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind [psyche] determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it. And it is a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of defect. Furthermore, it is a mean state in that whereas the vices either fall short of or exceed what is right in feelings and in actions, virtue ascertains and adopts the mean.

To each virtue, in this Aristotelian way of thinking, there corresponds not one but two vices: courage, for instance, contrasts against cowardice and recklessness. It appears that in art, and in virtue, there is an understanding of 'nothing superfluous and nothing missing'.

A similar idea also appears in Celtic sources. Here is another example from the Instructions of Cormac, in which Cormac's nephew asks how he should behave "among the wise and the foolish, among friends and strangers, among the old and the young, among the innocent and the wicked" – or in other words, how he should behave no matter where he is, no matter who he is dealing with, and no matter what is going on around him. Cormac answers him like this:

Be not too wise, be not too foolish,
be not too conceited, be not too diffident,
be not too haughty, be not too humble,
be not too talkative, be not too silent,
be not too harsh, be not too feeble.
If you be too wise, one will expect (too much) of you;
If you be too foolish, you will be deceived;
If you be too conceited, you will be thought vexatious;
If you be too humble, you will be without honour;
If you be too talkative, you will not be heeded;
If you be too silent, you will not be regarded;
If you be too harsh, you will be broken;
If you be too feeble, you will be crushed.

Cormac's point appears to be that all one's qualities of character must be fine-tuned, so to speak, so that nothing is excessive nor deficient. A similar idea is introduced in the Irish story of Manannan's Three Calls to Cormac, in which the future king Cormac is brought to the Otherworld, and shown several magical wonders. One was explained to him as symbolizing

"all that look for a fortune in Ireland, putting together cattle and riches. For when they go out, all that they leave in their houses goes to nothing, and so they go on for ever." Manannan's point has to do with the wrongness of putting yourself before others. Cormac is also shown "a young lord that is more liberal than he can afford, and everyone else is served while he is getting ready for the feast, and everyone else profiting by it." This is explained by Manannan as the wrongness of putting others before yourself. Again, a strong notion of 'The Mean', as Aristotle might have recognised it, is implied here.
This brings to mind again virtue's social orientation. For the idea of the Noble also involves a certain kind of social standing, and is intelligible only in a socially constituted world. This social orientation of the idea of the noble begins with Aristotle, and his famous discourse on the Great Soul, in the Nicomachean Ethics. The Great Soul is generous, just, and magnanimous; virtues that are unintelligible apart from the people and the communities which they respect and benefit. The idea of the Noble also appears in Hegel's masterwork, the Phenomenology of Spirit. According to Hegel, the Noble Soul "sees in public authority what is in accord with itself" (§500, pg. 305) and hence identifies itself with the power and wealth of the State, and with service to the State, even to the point of self-sacrifice (c.f. §503, pg. 306). We need not accept Hegel's specific political dimension of Nobility. But the point is just that in the original, pagan idea of the Noble, there is a meeting-place between aesthetics and ethics. Nobility is a 'sensible perfection', like a work of art: for a noble person is complete in herself, and beautiful to see. Yet Nobility is also involved in various social entanglements, like a virtue. The idea of the Noble thus stands in both worlds.
The meeting place of morality and beauty appears in mythology in the unquenchable joy for life that so many of the heroes express, notwithstanding that they also saw their world as such an unpredictable, precarious place. Historian Edith Hamilton wrote that:

The Greeks were keenly aware, terribly aware, of life's uncertainty and the imminence of death. Over and over again they emphasize the brevity and the failure of all human endeavour, the swift passing of all that is beautiful and joyful. To Pindar, even as he glorifies the victor in the games, life is 'a shadow's dream'. But never, not in their darkest moments, do they lose their taste for life. It is always a wonder and a delight, the world a place of beauty, and they themselves rejoicing to be alive in it.

This is a very romantic observation. Nietzsche noted it in some of his works as well. And while Hamilton thought it was distinct to the Greek world, in fact it can be found all over pre-Christian Europe, and all over the Aboriginal world too. A poetic fragment by G.K. Chesterton expresses this idea in reference to the Irish:

For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry,
And all their songs are sad.

It would appear that Chesterton's view of the Celts was similar to Hamilton's view of the Greeks: that the Celts were a people whose talent for enjoying life could not be quelled by anything. There are enough examples of this in the literature that it's hard to pick which to mention here. There is Fionn MacCumhall's statement that the finest music in all the world is simply 'the music of what happens'. Another favourite of mine comes from the story of Oisin, the Irish hero brought to the Otherworld by Niamh of the Golden Hair. He returned from the Otherworld to find that in his absence Ireland had been converted to Christianity. Saint Patrick asked him what sustained his people before the Gospel teachings arrived.

Oisin's answer, well known to Druids today, is "truth that was in our hearts, and strength in our arms, and fulfillment in our tongues." This is not the morality of a man who humbly accepts and stoically endures whatever the world throws at him. It is the morality of a man who participates in the world, and indeed by means of qualities like strength and integrity, is able to express himself and possess himself in the world. It is the morality of a man who is delighted to be alive.

8. Summary remarks

In this long discussion I have attempted to show the way toward these philosophical conclusions:

- The model of ethics that obtained in the world of the pagan Celts, and other pre-Christian Europeans, is the model of Virtue, where what matters is the kind of person that you are, the habits and dispositions of character you possess, and the various social relationships in which you live.
- We cannot uncritically revive or restore a pagan virtue, unchanged from ancient times. Nor is it quite right to modify the ancient model of virtue to accommodate contemporary purposes. Rather, it is better to craft our own model of virtue. It may be inspired by ancient concepts, but must be founded primarily on our own ideas, needs, and philosophical enquiries.
- My suggestion for such a foundation, inspired by ancient virtue yet founded in autonomous philosophical exploration, is that we ought to think of virtue as having an aesthetic orientation. Just as a person may craft a beautiful cabinet, a beautiful poem, or a beautiful garden, so she may also craft a beautiful sense of character for herself.
- The classical view of aesthetics, in which beauty is an intelligible perfection that directs the mind toward immaterial realities, cannot properly accommodate an meeting between the beautiful and the ethical.
- The modern view of aesthetics, in which beauty is a sensible perfection and all its relations and associations form an entirely self-contained whole, also cannot do that job.
- An aesthetic orientation for virtue can be sustained by a 'third' view of aesthetics, in which people create art for the sake of exploring who and what we are, what more and what else we could be, and for the sake of finding ways to dwell in the world.
- As beauty is the sign of excellence in Art, so is Nobility the sign of excellence in ethics. In the concept of Nobility we have that which is ethically virtuous, and at the same time that which is a pleasure to see. The concept of the Noble thus bridges the traditional distance between the beautiful and the good.

There are still some questions that I have left unanswered here. For instance, there are other conceptions of the idea of the Noble. Nietzsche's idea of nobility, for instance, is highly individualist, and would never identify itself with the State as Hegel's or Aristotle's idea of nobility does. Furthermore, I have not completely overcome Thomas Mann's criticism that those who live by aesthetics might be capable of justifying cruelty and injustice in the name of art. But I'll have to leave those problems for future research. This connection between the beautiful and the good, which I have described here today, is distinct to contemporary Druidry, and to other spiritual traditions inspired by ancient European heroic and classical societies. To the best of my knowledge, no other spiritual tradition in the world is capable of sustaining such a connection in a systematic way. For no other spiritual tradition in the world holds that character and identity are the central concepts of ethics, above and beyond moral rules and duties and consequences. And no other spiritual tradition in the world associates the good life with artistic productivity and embodied aesthetic satisfaction, in quite the same systematic way. I think, therefore, that this idea is worth exploring further, and worthy of

being presented to our community, and to our world, as both a field of further questions, and as a model for how we should live.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm grateful for your time and attention. Thank you very much.

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The Author

Brendan Myers, Ph.D, is the author of six philosophical books, including the award winning treatment of Pagan ethics, "The Other Side of Virtue", as well as a novel, and a Pagan-themed political strategy game. He is a co-founder of the Order of the White Oak, and a long time participant in the Druidic community in Ontario, Canada. In a career spanning more than twenty years he has worked with Public Safety Canada, the Pacific Business and Law Institute, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and he has published with the B.C. Civil Liberties Association and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency. Brendan has taught philosophy at four universities on two continents, and experienced pagan culture in eight Canadian provinces and four European countries. Presently he serves as professor of philosophy and humanities at Cégep Heritage College, in Gatineau, Quebec. Find him on the web at http://brendanmyers.net

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